Welcome to the first of what will hopefully become an annual QAC digest to give staff regular updates on all things Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement.

New in AY2016-17:

**Annual QAC School visits:**
It is probably fair to say that many people in the University see the work asked of Schools by the QAC as a hurdle they must cross and they don’t really understand what the Committee can do to help Schools enhance their teaching provision. In order to dispel some of the myths around the QAC a series of short visits to each School is being instigated. These will offer Schools the opportunity to discuss pertinent issues with the QAC Convenor, the School QAC representative and the QAC member who has routine oversight of the School’s teaching provision through the Annual Course and Programme reviews and the External Examiner reports. It will also give the QAC representatives the opportunity to follow up on any issues raised in our internal review processes.

**Pilot revised Internal Teaching Review (ITR) process:**
The University Committee on Teaching & Learning has approved a pilot of a new ITR process which will be carried out in Spring 2018 in the School of Language, Literature, Music and Visual Culture and in Autumn 2018 with the School of Engineering. The new process should be less bureaucratic and onerous for Schools to undergo and there will be a greater emphasis on Quality Enhancement. Further details of the new process can be found at [https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/internal-teaching-review-6112.php](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/internal-teaching-review-6112.php).

**Revisions to the Academic Quality Handbook (AQH):**
The AQH has undergone major revisions. It has been made more accessible, cutting down on unnecessary material and whilst no policies have been changed it will be easier to locate these on the AQH webpages. The new AQH can be found at [https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/academic-quality-handbook-838.php](https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/academic-quality-handbook-838.php).
Good/innovative practice from across the Institution:

Members of QAC spend considerable time looking through samples of Annual Course Review forms (ACR), all of each School’s Annual Programme Review forms (APR) and External Examiners’ reports taking note of declared good or innovative practice. Sadly examples of innovative practice identified through these actions in the past Academic Year have been limited. But this does not mean that very few lecturers at the University are innovative in their teaching; on the contrary, we hear from other fora, such as the Annual Academic Development Symposium (https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/annual-academic-development-symposium-3219.php) and the Annual Learning and Teaching Network Event (https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/annual-teaching-fellows-network-event-2016-5387.php) as well as our response to the QAA Scotland Enhancement Themes (https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/enhancement-themes-3473.php) that there is a lot of good practice being carried out around the University but we are very poor at telling other people about it. This is why we ask that question in the ACR and the APR reports. If Course Coordinators do not reflect on what they’ve done that’s new or innovative, the APR cannot reflect innovative practice in the Discipline’s programmes and this cannot then be disseminated throughout the School and the University. I would encourage course coordinators to take a step back and consider how they teach and assess, what they might do, or have done, to change their practice and reflect on how successful these changes have been so that we can all learn from each other. A few representative examples of innovative practice from the ACRs, APRs and External Examiners’ reports from 2015-16 are shown below.

- Often lecturers find that their course is not well covered by a commercial textbook or that the commercial textbooks are more detailed or broader than they require. Whilst this might encourage student to broaden their reading it might also make it difficult for students to find clarification of lecture material, not being able to “see the wood for the trees”. Lecturers on AC1011 have addressed this by making available a free online “textbook” written by the lecturers to meet the specific needs of the course. Students found the textbook clear, well-structured and easy to understand and especially useful because it contained only material important for the course. This might be an appropriate approach to use where conventional texts contain too much information and you do not require students to read more widely around the topic. Contact Dr Chandana Alawattage (c.g.alawattage@abdn.ac.uk) for more information.

- Course Coordinators often comment on the difficulty of teaching a class with a wide range of abilities and how sometimes the better able students become demotivated because the material taught is perceived as too easy. The Course coordinator of ZO3307 has addressed this by introducing weekly “optional challenges” which provide extension material over and above the lecture material. These have been useful in keeping better able students (in a very mixed cohort of students) motivated, has helped to improve student engagement, led to greater satisfaction with the course and improved student performance. See https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/2016-presentations-4834.php and contact Dr Vasilis Louca (v.louca@abdn.ac.uk) for more information. Similarly in a large first year chemistry course the course organiser has introduced self-study problems to MyAberdeen which are graded in difficulty as “easy”, “not so easy” and “harder than the exam”. The course organiser notes that many students do tackle the most difficult questions and he gives feedback to the student, and the whole class if applicable, via email. Contact Dr Bill Harrison (w.harrison@abdn.ac.uk) for more information.

- Recording lectures is fairly standard across many disciplines but how does the student easily find that difficult bit of the lecture if they want to recap on something? A first year chemistry course coordinator has solved this problem by producing short movie clips to explain the most difficult concepts. These have been well received by students and have improved students’ confidence with some challenging material. Contact Dr Peter Henderson (p.henderson@abdn.ac.uk) for more information.
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- Have you thought about experimenting with flipping the classroom but were too afraid to try? Several lecturers have experimented with some form of flipped lecture in the last academic year. Feedback from students on these classes has been variable; some like the approach, some don’t but staff who have used it are very keen to share their experience. Flipped lectures were used last year in two psychology course (L2 and L4), in a postgraduate Linguistics course and in a second year chemistry course. Contact Dr Mirjam Brady-Van Den Bos (mirjam.brady@abdn.ac.uk), Dr Agni Connor (agni.connor@abdn.ac.uk) and Dr Bill Harrison (w.harrison@abdn.ac.uk) for more information.

- The number of courses at the University of Aberdeen is huge so students can find it difficult to make an informed choice for their optional courses. Students make their choice from a short descriptor in the Catalogue of Courses but how many then find they really don’t like the topic but are too late to change course? Philosophy have started making short promotional videos for some of their courses to help students make more informed course choice decisions. Contact Dr Federico Luzzi (fluzzi@abdn.ac.uk), Dr Paula Sweeney (p.sweeney@abdn.ac.uk) or Dr Gerry Hough (g.hough@abdn.ac.uk) for more information.

Areas for development:

Some areas for development that have been identified by course coordinators themselves or by External Examiners (EEs) are outlined below. The QAC has made note of these areas for development and are content that the School/Discipline is addressing them but some of these constitute areas where improvements may be possible across the Institution. The QAC therefore would like to encourage course coordinators and programme leaders to consider the following for their own courses and programmes and determine whether any changes/improvements could be made.

- Disciplines should consider reviewing on a regular basis how skills, both subject-specific skills and the Aberdeen Graduate Attributes, map across degree programmes to ensure they are current and that there is limited overlap between courses. This is especially important when thinking about reducing assessment effort; consider a new form of assessment rather than relying on all the old faithful again. The content of courses change over the years as new staff come on board and over time this can lead to some drifting away from what was originally devised. In addition, subject benchmark statements are revised periodically so a regular mapping against these ensures our programmes remain current. Updated curriculum maps will now become a standard part of the new ITR submission.

- The marking and new moderation processes were commented on favourably by a number of EEs. Unfortunately an occasional EE felt that justification for grades awarded by markers and/or the rationale for an agreed mark (where they had originally differed) was not clear. In those cases the School was reminded of the University policy on marking and moderation which clearly outlines the need for documentation of all decisions, and the QAC will look specifically at this in future EE reports. Staff are reminded that the Moderation Procedures policy is available at https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/assessment-policies-and-guidance-6099.php.

- One EE commented that the Learning Outcomes for a course were not clear. The new Curriculum Management process for course and programme approval will go live for the 2017-18 cycle, replacing the old SENAS system, and a change in that process is that course coordinators will have to make a clearer link between learning outcomes and assessments and level of study. Staff can find guidance on how to write ideal learning outcomes at https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/teaching/learning-outcomes-1045.php.
The low rate of return of online Student Course Evaluation Forms (SCEF) is clear from a number of courses although some areas of the University have consistently high rates of return. A short-term working group will be set up to investigate how to improve the gathering of student feedback. If you would like to be part of this group please put your name forward for consideration to Nick Edwards, Clerk to the QAC (n.edwards@abdn.ac.uk).

Items to be taken through Committees in AY 2017-18:

Resits in UG degrees and use of resit grade for classification purposes:
Following External Examiner comments that our policy of not including resit grades in the final degree classification was rather harsh a paper will be taken through UG and PG Committees, QAC and UCTL to discuss various issues around our current resit policy with a view to a change in policy being implemented, if approved, as soon as possible in AY2017-18.

Exams Officer roles and responsibilities:
Exams Officers play a vital role in ensuring the smooth running of our exams and assessments and ensure Examiners’ Meetings are conducted according to University policy. However, we currently do not have any written roles and responsibilities for this vital group of staff and we do not offer formal training for the role. This year a short training session was put in place prior to the May exam diet. This was well attended by School Admin Officers (who play a vital supportive role in the exams process) but it was less well attended by academic Exams Officers. A document highlighting the roles and responsibilities of Exams Officers has been prepared and will be taken through Committees at the start of AY2017-18. Further Exams Officer training sessions will be carried out in May 2018. It is hoped that UCTL will approve the QAC recommendation that attendance at these sessions should be made compulsory for School/Discipline Exams Officers as a means to ensure that we have complete adherence to University policies across the Institution, and that any changes to procedure and policy communicated via email are highlighted.

Policy on the use by students of external proof-reading services:
There are a plethora of external bodies that offer a commercial proofreading service to students and we have to accept that some of our students will use these services. Currently we have no policy or guidance on this and offer students no advice on whether or not we accept it. A draft “proofreading” policy has been prepared and will go through the Committees in early AY2017-18.

Anonymity at Examiners’ Meetings:
Lack of anonymity at exam boards has been raised as a concern by a number of EEs. The University currently only strongly recommends that anonymity be maintained but does not insist on it. It is proposed to raise this through the usual Committee structure during 2017-18.